Education extra: Guiding lights

Mentors are there for kids who need reliable adults in their lives

By Erika Chavez -- Bee Staff Writer
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Dozens of kids at Parkway Elementary School look forward to their lunch hour with barely contained anticipation.

The lunch bell rings and they make a beeline to a sparsely furnished bungalow on the edge of campus, not emerging until the bell sounds again.

Inside, a cacophony of noise fills the room as the children relish the company of the volunteers who come to the school every day. The adults pull up folding chairs and share a pizza, read a book or play a game of dominoes with the children, seemingly simple acts that can positively influence a child's life for years to come, according to mentoring advocates.

"My favorite days of the week are Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday because I get to see my mentor," said 11-year-old Curtis Willis, a sixth-grader with inquisitive eyes and a ready smile. "We have lunch and talk and play games, and he gives us assignments so we are always learning."

Curtis, who is being raised by a single mother, says his mentor "is like a second parent. Even if I get in trouble at school or something, he will try to help me turn it around and make the best out of it."

The Lunch Buddies mentoring program has made a tangible difference at Parkway Elementary, according to Principal Deborah Franklin. The school serves students from the troubled Franklin Villa neighborhood, and many of them deal with poverty, violence and neglect, she said.

"There are a lot of social and emotional issues in their lives that prevent them from learning," Franklin said. "But just having somebody in these kids' lives that thinks they are special enough

to take time out of their day and spend it with them -- it inspires them."

Over the past two years, Franklin has seen students improve their grades and test scores while building relationships with their mentors.

"I've watched them improve totally -- socially, emotionally and academically," she said. "The mentor program gives our kids a sense of family and helps make school a safe haven for them."

The ranks of mentors in America have quintupled over the past decade to 2.5 million following a presidential push and public awareness campaigns. Still, 15 million children in the country would benefit from having a mentor, according to a study by the National Mentoring Partnership.

Out of the more than 35 million young people ages 10 to 18 in the United States, the study says one out of four lives with only one parent, one out of five lives in poverty and one out of 10 won't graduate from high school.

Many mentors can relate to those circumstances, and give their time to help kids from a similar background.

"I did not have mentors and grew up in a single-parent home," said RaeKwon Muenda, 39, a delivery driver who mentors eight children at Parkway Elementary through Lunch Buddies and an after-school program. Curtis Willis is one of those children.

"I grew up in a similar community and always wanted to help those kids that maybe don't see a way out. I hope to let them know there is a way out and they shouldn't let their environment dictate who they are," he said.

Muenda, who is married with three sons of his own, brings the kids pizza, helps them with homework and gives them math and writing assignments, handing out prizes as an incentive to complete the tasks.

"If we don't have stuff, like school supplies, he makes sure we get it," Curtis said. "He always tries to help us with our goals and encourages us to never give up."

Eleven-year-old DaVonna Donely-Davis said Muenda is "like another parent."

"He wants us to have a better life, and tries to teach us important lessons."

While no definitive statistics show the effect of mentoring, small samples and anecdotal evidence suggest that students with mentors show improved grades and increased self-confidence.

A survey by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Sacramento found that 73 percent of the organization's 184 clients reported improved confidence since meeting their big brother or sister. That has long been a goal for Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, which is celebrating its centennial this year.

In the Sacramento City Unified School District, the Academic Mentoring Program, or AMP, pairs high school students in foster care with community members. They help with homework and give advice to the kids as they prepare to turn 18 and leave the foster care system.

Foster kids are among the most vulnerable student populations, according to Sonja Stires, who oversees AMP. Statistics show that after leaving foster care half of foster kids won't graduate from high school; almost half will be unemployed; and more than three out of 10 will be arrested.

"Through mentoring, we hope to give them a connection with a positive adult role model and help them connect to available resources while they transition out of the foster care system," Stires said.

Founded in early 2003 through state grants, the program paid quick dividends.

Of its first 70 students this school year, four out of 10 earned higher grade-point averages after the first quarter, Stires said.

For many, it's a stable presence in their lives that makes the difference and inspires them to work harder, Stires said.

"Before I had a mentor everything in school seemed kind of hard and now it's easier," said Robert, a senior at Hiram Johnson High School whose last name is being withheld because he is in foster care. Robert's grades reflect the difference, improving from D's to C's.

"Now, I have somebody I can talk to," he said. "I feel supported. I feel like my mentor wants me to pass, and he's going to help me no matter what."

The San Juan and Elk Grove school districts also have various mentoring programs with a consensus among educators that mentors, who come from a variety of backgrounds, are a positive influence.

"We've seen some turnarounds in kids who came from almost impossible circumstances," said Dave Gordon, superintendent of the Elk Grove Unified School District. Those kids are now college-bound, he said. "It's just remarkable, some of the stories that you see as a result of people reaching out and lending a hand."

The reasons for volunteering vary. Some, like Tedd Woodard, had mentors of their own and hope to repay the kindness.

"I remember Mr. Martin, my eighth-grade teacher," said Woodard, a retiree and substitute teacher who grew up in a Chicago housing project. He is a mentor at Parkway Elementary.

"He helped me through some difficult times in my family and made a difference. I wanted to do the same for someone else," said Woodard, who kept in touch with his mentor throughout college.

Others are just seeking some company.

"My son is in high school now and doesn't need me around as much," said Mary Aye of Elk Grove. "I wasn't ready to give those things up."

Aye built a relationship with a third-grader at Peter Burnett Elementary, where she volunteered last year.

The two meet once a week for lunch and then color, read and play games. On the girl's birthday, Aye baked cupcakes for the classroom. During school breaks, they get together for movies and ice skating.

The little girl comes from a troubled home, and Aye hopes to give her "a sense of stability."

"When I say I'll be there, I'll be there," she said.

Mentor relationships range from one weekly lunch to regular excursions and even trips, as the mentors get to know and gain the trust of parents or guardians.

Tall, stout Calvin Franklin became a Big Brother five years ago and has built a deep friendship with small, wiry Roderick Clayborn, now an eighth-grader at Samuel Jackman Middle School.

Married with two daughters, Franklin has taken 14-year-old Clayborn on a trip to Yosemite and brings him along to Bella Vista High School basketball games, where he coaches the girls junior varsity team.

The two have spent Saturdays at Oakland A's games, movies or just sitting in front of the television playing video games and "trash talking."

"He's like a father and a big brother to me," said Clayborn, who has been raised by his older sister since his mother died when he was a baby. He has never met his father, he said.

"He has taught me to be myself," Clayborn said.

Being around Clayborn inspired Franklin, 27, to return to school to earn a degree and a teaching credential, he said; now, the two have occasional study nights, when they sit and work on their respective homework. One semester, Franklin took Clayborn

along to a Saturday morning sociology class at Cosumnes River College to expose him to the college experience.

"He was very proud because we earned an A in that class," Franklin said.

Big Brother pairings officially end when the child turns 18, but that won't mean the end of the relationship, Franklin vows.

"If it can be for life, this is for life," he said. "He has become a part of my family, as far as I'm concerned."

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